INCHOATE FEMINISM IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC V

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By the last part of the fifth century in classical Greece, the question of female status was finally being addressed. The *Trachiniae*, the *Medea*, and the *Alcestis* all explored issues concerning the treatment of women, while the *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* explicitly addressed the question of the female role. Plato, perhaps the most vehement critic of Athens, thoroughly explored this issue in his most famous work, the *Republic*.

In this work, Plato exhibits his strong contempt for the Athenian state. Convinced that the state has a profound effect on the virtue of its citizens, Plato makes his primary function in this dialogue the construction of a utopian state that achieves the greatest possible happiness and virtue for the entire community. For Plato, this notion of community happiness entails neither liberty, equality or justice as they are understood today, but instead values harmony, efficiency and most importantly, moral goodness. Furthermore, the utilitarian good will always take precedence over any individual's good. Plato's utopia is imbued with his unique socialism as well as his culture's elitism. Thus, Plato was concerned with neither liberation for anyone nor with righting the sexist wrongs of his society; his only goal was to attempt to create an ideal state that produced excellence on all levels. Smith argues that none of Plato's arguments or proposals stand alone, but that all are made "in the service of his larger aim,—to arrange hierarchy, social power, and control, so that

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'the best' rules over the worst, with reason, according to nature" (27).

The status of women in Republic V, therefore, must be understood in terms of this higher goal. Plato's only intent in making his proposal for women is to achieve what is best for the state, and he does not frame his proposals with terms such as equality, fairness or feminism. The post-Enlightenment notion of sex-equality is in fact incompatible with Plato's aristocratic program which stratifies a society into permanent classes. Nevertheless, Plato's treatment of the position of women in his ideal state, and in the guardian class in particular, is extremely important. Smith explains that

> Plato was the first Western philosopher to work out a philosophical thesis which takes a central place in many contemporary investigations in feminist theory. (27)

The focal point of many of these investigations is Book V of the Republic (Republic V) in which he carefully outlines[1] the role of women in the guardian class. Socrates begins his treatment of the position of women at 451d as he questions whether women should perform the same functions as men. Using the metaphor of female watchdogs, he pushes Polemarchus, Ademaintus, and Glaucon to re-consider the traditional view of the female role.[2]

> Soc.: Do we think that the wives of our guardian watchdogs should guard what the males guard, hunt with them, and do everything else in common with them? Or should we keep the women at home, as incapable of doing this, since they must bear and rear the puppies, while the males work and have the entire

care of the flock? (451d, trans. G.M.A. Grube)

Using this metaphor, Socrates forces the interlocutors to agree that women and men should perform the same tasks and they all agree that if the state uses "the women for the same things as the men, they must also be taught the same things" (452a).

Because Socrates appreciates the radical nature of his proposal and expects that the education of women will be met with incredulity, he takes time to address the importance of reason over social convention.

> Soc.: And now that we've begun to speak about this, we must move on to the tougher part of the law, begging these people not to be silly but to take the matter seriously. They should remember that it wasn't very long ago that the Greeks themselves thought it shameful and ridiculous (as the majority of the barbarians still do) for even men to be seen naked and that when the Cretans and then the Lacedaemonians began the gymnasiums, the wits of those times could also have ridiculed it all. (452c-d)

In this argument, Socrates illustrates his willingness to reject the social and cultural mores of his time in the interest of excellence. His appeal to rationality over accepted cultural norms is important for feminist methodology, which must combat a history permeated by sexist tradition.

After confirming the logic of his initial proposal, Socrates then turns to the question of whether or not "female nature *can* share all the tasks of that of the male, or none of them, or some of them" (453a). The interlocutors must examine their now paradoxical posi-

tion: they claim that though men and women have different natures, they should nevertheless perform the same tasks. This raises problems because they have already agreed that "different natures must follow different ways of life..."(453e). Determined to pursue the initial position, Socrates decides to scrutinize more closely the issue of nature. He argues that their problem originates with their failure to "examine the form of natural difference and sameness"(454b).

Thus, he begins to investigate the relevance of the differences between men and women. Though he does not deny that there is a difference, he reminds the interlocutors that the discussion of difference has focused on " the one form of sameness and difference that was relevant to the particular ways of lives themselves" (454c). Framing the notion of difference in this way, he then asserts one of the most heretical views of his time: the biological differences that exist between men and women do not entail intellectual and moral differences and, therefore, are without social significance:

> Soc.: if the male sex is seen to be different from the female with regard to particular craft or way of life, we'll say that relevant one must be assigned to it. But if it's apparent that they differ only in this respect, that the females bear children while the males beget them, we'll say that there has been no kind of proof that women are different from men with respect to what we're talking about, and we'll continue to believe that our guardians and their wives must have the same way of life. (454e)

Socrates then pushes the argument further, claiming that the burden of proof to show how men and women differ other than biologically lies with the individual who would bar women from

equal education. He never denies that there might be fundamental differences between the sexes but claims that the obvious difference in biology has no social implications. Smith gives the following account of Socrates position on the possibility of other differences between the sexes:

> he takes a position in which a neutral or open scientific question on the differences between the sexes yields to a social and moral imperative. The evidence on sex differences is not all in. If there is a lack of definitive evidence, why suppose unequal status or training is preferable to equal training? Give the benefit of the open question to those who might excel under the more generous proposal of equal education. The burden of proof lies with those who would deny equal status. (31)

Though the arguments in Republic V thus far demonstrate a radical departure from the prevailing attitudes and assumptions concerning women in classical Greece, Socrates does qualify this emancipated role for women: "the various natures are distributed in the same way in both creatures[3]. Women share by nature in every way of life just as men do, but in all of them women are weaker than men" (455e).

This qualification leads Glaucon to raise the question of the type of education for the male and female guardians: "should we have one kind of education to produce women guardians, then, and another to produce men, especially as they have the same natures to begin with" (456d)? Socrates, again in the interest of the highest good for the state, argues against this, asking if "there is anything better for a city than having the best possible men and women as its

citizens"(456e)? Because the answer to his question is obviously no, and, because they have determined that music, poetry and physical training are those things which will produce the best male guardians, the interlocutors establish identical curricula for the female and male guardians.

Socrates' next move in Republic V is to abolish the nuclear family of the guardian class. Recognizing the tension between the oikos and the polis, Socrates substitutes the nuclear family with communal coupling. This coupling will be the basis for a eugenic program that will ensure the proliferation of excellence in the society. Throughout this proposal, though the language is arsenocentric - "community of children and wives for the guardians"- Socrates proposes the same conditions and practices for men and women. Okin has argued that, despite Socrates' imposition of the same restrictions on both men and women, the language suggests that female guardians are to be the property of the male ones. She claims that "women are classified by Plato, as they were by the culture in which he lived, as an important subsection of property(34). Vlastos, however, refutes this view, explaining how this conclusion is not entailed by the specific conditions discussed in the text:[4]

> in any given marriage-group every woman belongs to all the men in the peculiar, but precise, sense that, make any one of them the father of her child. Mutatis mutandis every man belongs to every woman in his group in exactly the same sense. And there is no other relevant sense of "belonging." So the relation cannot be ownership. It would make no sense to say that x is y's property when y is also x's property.(15)

Because Vlastos shows how the textual evidence is contrary to

Okin's reading, it is implausible to view Plato as having classified women in their traditional role as the subordinate charge of the male.[5] His language is problematic, but it is possible that customary language habits outlasted the prejudices that created them.[6]

Within his proposal for the abolition of the nuclear family, which clearly rejects the contemporary norms of classical Greece, Socrates makes unprecedented provisions for the sexual status of those men and women who have surpassed the age of child-bearing[7]:

> I think that when women and men have passed the age of having children, we'll leave them free to have sex with whomever they wish.(461c)

With the elimination of private property in the guardian class, strict sexual restrictions are no longer necessary; the proper inheritance of private property was the primary function of regulating the sex lives of women[8]. Thus, a sexual liberty, which was always available to Athenian men, is granted to women. Vlastos comments that "the double standard of sexual morality is wiped out"(14).

Socrates' description of the sexual status of the guardian women is his last specific treatment of women in the Republic. He does continue, however, to make disparaging remarks about "womanish" behavior. Furthermore, he fails to create an emancipatory program for the majority of the free women in the ideal society. Commenting nowhere at length on their status, he implicitly suggests that the typical status quo position of Athenian women will apply to the women of the lower strata. In analyzing this unambiguously anti-feminist attitude toward the auxiliary and guardian classes, it should be noted, however, that the status of men in these classes is also oppressive. Plato's elitism, and not his putative misogyny, is the

overarching oppressor of these lower strata.

Having outlined the arguments evinced in Republic V, we can now begin to address the question of their significance for women. The status of women in fourth century Athens was in general one of oppression. Geddes provides a more specific account of their position:

> women had no political power, no real control over wealth, were considered in the eyes of the law as adjuncts to their men folk rather than as people in their own right, were not educated to enjoy the artistic and scientific pleasures that their culture offered, and by convention were deprived of the society and conversation of the privileged citizens of that culture. They were denied the satisfactions of political, commercial, intellectual, and social engagement in the life of their times.(36)

Therefore, while the position of the women in the artisan and auxiliary classes doesn't really differ from the status quo, the position of the guardian women is markedly distinct. Vlastos contends that on the basis of Socrates' description, it follows that the guardian women would enjoy seven sets of rights that are systematically denied to women in Plato's Athens: the right to education, the right to vocational opportunity, the right to unimpeded social intercourse, legal capacity, the right to sexual choice (following the child-bearing years, the right to own and dispose of property,[9] and political rights. This set of radical new freedoms put forth in Republic V, therefore, is arguably the boldest rejection of convention ever submitted for the purpose of liberating Athenian women. Interestingly, the program includes even more rigor than the Athenian fantasy of gender

equality manifested in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazousae. How ironic that a philosopher's serious argument for the ideal state is more audacious than a poet's parody of the absurd.

Many argue, however, that the seemingly progressive nature of Book V belies Plato's true feelings of misogyny. Scholars who makes this argument base their conclusions on both Plato's personal anti-feminist attitude and on the logic of his arguments in Book V. In my view, Plato's personal feelings need not be taken into consideration in the analysis of his philosophy. Even so, there are two possible answers to this claim. Wender holds the view that, though Plato disliked women, his homosexuality rendered their emancipation non-threatening:

> The misogynist homosexual has less to lose than the married man; he does not depend on the little woman at home to boost his ego and provide his comforts. Since he does not like women as they are, he would think it a small loss if they changed: if they should lose their femininity and become more like men, he might actually like them.(87-88)

Wender pushes her argument further as she hypothesizes that "the heterosexual male is more afraid of the power of women"(88). Though unconventional, Wender's argument is relevant in light of Plato's strong sexual preferences and the unique nature of sexuality in classical Greece. Nevertheless, a more cogent answer to the charge can be made on the basis of Plato's metaphysics through which he sought a rational foundation for philosophic truths that were to be logically independent of his cultural milieu. Providing the possibility of complete transformation, the realm of the Forms commit Plato to admitting the potentiality of all people; those who come to know

the Form of the Good will be transformed, experiencing a "turnabout of the soul from a day that is like night to the true day"(521c).

Other scholars argue that the curriculum of the female guardians is simply a logical consequent of Plato's abolition of the family. Okin concludes that "If the female guardians were no longer to be defined in relation to particular men, children, and households, it seems that Plato had no alternative but to consider them persons in their own right"(40). There are several problems with this argument. First, the argument requires that the status of the female guardians follow from the proposed abolition of the family. If this is so, then Okin cannot assume that there would already be women in the guardian class, since this is only confirmed at the outset of the discussion of their emancipation. Therefore, Plato is in no way committed to allowing women, who were theoretically no longer housewives and mothers, admission into the guardian class. If he believed that women were incapable of the highest excellence, it is doubtful that he would, against his inclinations, willingly place them in the highest class. Socrates is not restricted to one option; he could make a separate class for the female guardians or he could place them in the lower classes. Furthermore, contained in his argument for women guardians are the assertions that 1-biological differences do not have social and political implications and that 2-gender is unrelated to soul, but, rather, individual souls determine the character of individuals. Both of these iconoclastic beliefs are too strong to have been made purely as subsidiary conditions to the nuclear family's elimination. Annas, who rejects the characterization of Plato as a feminist, recognizes the independence of the two proposals:

Plato justifies the abolition of the nuclear family solely

> on the grounds of eugenics and of the unity of the state and there is seems no reason why these grounds should not hold even if women were not full Guardians and had a subordinate status; Plato's second proposal is thus in principle independent of his first.(308)

These propositions, however, do not stand alone but are made in order to achieve the highest form of moral goodness for the state. By rejecting the supposed causal link between Plato's two proposals, I am in no way supporting the idea that Plato liberates guardian women in the interest of sex equality, but instead, I am arguing that both ideas follow from Plato's primary goal: utilitarian good.

Despite the sincerity of Plato's emancipatory program, there is still the problem with Socrates' claim that women are weaker than men. Smith comments that "if weaker is taken to mean generally inferior including inferior intellectual ability, then the thesis that women should be equally educated falls prey to a series of reductios"(28). Therefore, unless one wants to concede that all of Plato's arguments are undermined by this qualification-which is highly unlikely given Plato's fastidious method- the term weaker here cannot be interpreted to mean generally inferior. Smith suggests that "we could take the weaker qualification as merely implying that women should be excused from certain activities"(28). This interpretation is compatible with Socrates' recognition of some biological difference, and therefore seems the most consistent with the rest of Book V.

There still remains the problem of the depreciating remarks Socrates makes about women throughout the Republic. Vlastos is careful to point out that though these remarks are indeed sexist, "in the most damning of the disparaging remarks it is clear that he is speaking of women as they are under present, non ideal, condi-

tions"(18). Socrates is criticizing women as they are in contemporary Athens and not on the basis of their inherent nature. This qualification does not excuse the remarks but mitigates their significance as they apply to the common run of women who Plato believed, along with the common run of men, to be perverted and misshapen by their corrupt society and not by their intrinsic natures.

Socrates' treatment of the women in the auxiliary and artisan classes, however, is completely assailable for its anti-feminism. This unacceptable position works to mitigate the importance of Plato's radical proposal for the guardian women. Socrates' elitism, which at its worst border on becoming fascism, prohibits anyone from ever making the unqualified claim that Plato is a feminist.

Nevertheless, Plato cannot be vilified for his acceptance of the status quo. Never inventing any sexist or prejudice claims, he on the one hand, fulfills the fourth century stereotypes of women, but on the other hand, makes a startling break from the absoluteness of those conventions. Throughout his work, Plato displays a philosophical integrity that values reason over convention and the ideal over the personal. Demonstrating a remarkable ambivalence, Plato is full of tension and ostensible contradiction.

What then, if anything, can be said about Plato and his view of women? Vlastos claims that "Plato's affirmation of feminism within the ruling class of the Republic is the strongest ever made by anyone in the classical period"(12). Wender argues that Plato "advocated more liberation and privilege for them than any man in history had ever done, so far as we know"(82). I, like these scholars, view Plato as having come the closest to a feminist position in the classical period. I would not assert that Plato was a champion of feminism, nor fairness, nor equality of any kind. I do believe, however, that the views espoused in Republic V distinguish him

from his contemporaries and assure us today that even in fourth century Greece, elements of sexism were not always deemed rational. Unlike his student Aristotle, who not only accepted the stereotyped notions of women, but endorsed and justified them, Plato, in his ideal state, allowed exceptional women to participate in the sacred activity of philosophy. Thus, I am convinced that Republic V, in its rejection of the misogynist norms of Plato's Athens, is some of his finest philosophy.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Plato is never the actual speaker in the Republic. There is great scholarly debate over the relationship between Plato and the views espoused by his interlocutors, but this debate does not fall into the scope of this paper. As most of the scholars do, I will attribute the ideas and intentions of Socrates to Plato. I will not, however, attribute the views of any of the other interlocutors to Plato.

[2] Plato is unclear throughout Book V about whether his proposals are concerned with only the guardians or apply to the auxiliary and artisan classes as well. Scholars disagree about this matter, but I read these proposals as referring to the guardian class only.

[3] The creatures he refers to are men and women.

[4] Vlastos, in his article, is actually arguing against Pomeroy's view, but Pomeroy and Okin draw the same conclusion, both citing the language as evidence. Therefore, I feel that Vlastos' refutation of Pomeroy on this specific issue is tantamount to a refutation of Okin on the same issue.

[5] I am only arguing that Okin's view is implausible in the context of the guardian class. I would not take the argument any further, and I believe that she is generally correct about Plato's view of women but not in this instance.

[6] Gregory Vlastos, "Was Plato a Feminist?", Feminist Interpretations of Plato. 1994, p.15.

[7] The childbearing years in the Republic for women are between the ages of twenty and forty while and men are "from the time that he passes his peak as a runner until he reaches fifty-five."(460e)

[8] Anne Geddes, "The Philosophic Notion of Women in Antiquity." Antichthon, 9, 1975, p.36

[9] "Under Athenian law only men have this right. Among Plato's private property is denied equally to men and to women, public support is denied equally to men and women, public support is assured equally to both." (Vlastos, 14)